

Get a Health Check!

Healthy Churches are Growing Churches

by Jack De Vries



CRCA MINISTRY FORMATION

"A Church Reforming To Reach the Lost for Christ"

www.ministryformation.com.au

Good health is important. Billions of dollars are spent each year worldwide to improve health. People are encouraged to eat lots of vegetable and fruits, to exercise at least 30 minutes each day, to not smoke, and limit alcohol consumption. By taking little steps (literally) a person's general health can improve dramatically. Health experts tell us that regular walking can help you lose body fat, maintain a healthy weight, improve your fitness and reduce your risk of developing conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and even some cancers.

Personal physical health is very important; so too is church health, particularly if churches desire to grow and maximize their gospel impact. Healthy churches are growing churches. As Rick Warren writes: "Church growth is the natural result of church health."¹

There are different ways to measure church health. As Reformed churches we have been emphasizing that ever since the Reformation. In response to the issues facing the Christian church of the 16th century, Guido de Bres wrote the Belgic Confession which emphasizes three marks of healthy or "true" churches: *pure preaching of the gospel, pure administration of the sacraments, and the practice of church discipline.*² These marks became the hallmark for

¹*The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995) page 49

²See *Belgic Confession, Article 29*

Reformed churches of what a true church looks like.

Not to negate the importance of these three marks of the church, Reformed Christians continue to ask themselves, "What are the marks of a healthy church?" The primary issue in the past century has not been distinguishing between the true church and the false church. The issue is: how can we as a church be difference makers in an ever increasing secular society?

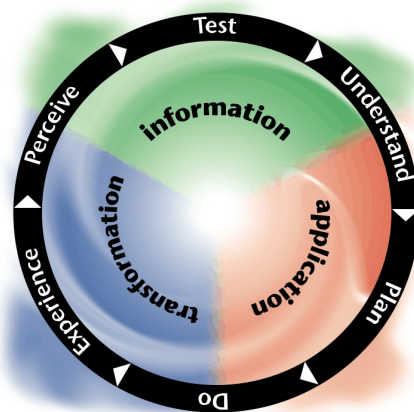
So, for example, you have Francis Schaeffer give a classic statement of what true

Christianity is all about. He emphasized the importance of "love" as **the** mark of the church.³ He takes his cue from what Jesus told his followers: "But I am giving you a new command. You must love each other, just as I have loved you. If you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples."

(John 13:34-35) It is true, isn't it? Christians could have the three marks emphasized by the early Reformers, but if the church is not marked by love – it is nothing (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:2).

Another Reformer John Piet underscores "missions" as **the** mark of the church. He writes: "The times in which we live differ from the time in which [the Reformers] lived. Actually, in this regard, we are closer sociologically to the writes of the New Testament than we are to the Reformers, because, we like Paul, the writers of the Gospels, and others – must formulate what

³*The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1970)



we believe not in contrast to what other Christians do, but by being in God's mission in God's world."⁴

Within the church growth/health movement there are various other approaches to the question of church health. Rick Warren, of Saddleback Community Church, focuses on the five purposes of the church⁵:

- fellowship
- discipleship
- worship
- ministry
- evangelism

Warren bases these five purposes of the church on the description of the early church in Acts 2. Warren make the point that all five of these purposes of the church need to be in balance. A church out of balance is not a healthy church.

Mark Dever, senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. , describes not one, not three, but as the title of his book suggests, **nine marks** of a healthy church.⁶ These nine marks are:

- Expository Preaching
- Biblical Theology
- Biblical Understanding of the Good News
- Biblical Understanding of Conversion
- Biblical Understanding of Evangelism

⁴*The Road Ahead, A Theology for the Church in Mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970) page 37

⁵*The Purpose Driven Church*, pp. 85ff

⁶*Nine Marks of a Health Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2004)

- Biblical Understanding of Membership
- Biblical Church Discipline
- Promotion of Christian Discipleship and Growth
- Biblical Understanding of Leadership

A number of churches within Australia have used the resources of National Church Life Survey (NCLS) to gauge congregational health. NCLS looks into three areas and identify three qualities in each area which can be used to measure the health of a church:

Internal Core Qualities:

Faith
Worship
Service

Inspirational Core Qualities:

Vision
Leadership
Faith-sharing

External Core Qualities:

Service
Innovation
Inclusion

So how do you measure church health? Pure preaching? Correct discipline? Love? Missions? Do you focus on one mark, three marks, or nine marks? Which approach is best? What can a church do to promote a healthy church?

Natural Church Development

Another approach to the question of church health is the one developed by Natural Church Development(NCD). Based on extensive research all across the world with thousands of churches NCD has identified the eight key core values or quality characteristics which will promote church health. These characteristics are:

- Empowering Leadership
- Gift-orientated Ministry

- Passionate Spirituality
- Functional Structures
- Inspiring Worship Services
- Holistic Small Groups
- Need-orientated Evangelism
- Loving Relationships

Now the purpose of this article is not to insist that NCD is the only worthwhile approach to gauge church health. As I have discovered in my years of ministry in the local church as well as in my current role in the CRCA, the process is more important than tool. But NCD does provide an excellent and easy system to measure church health and guide churches to better church health. As I work with churches from coast to coast I have discovered that NCD not only measures church health, but provides a framework to increase church health. Check out their website <http://ncd-australia.org.au> to find out more about the NCD process.

The main purpose of this article to share some of the stories of those within the CRCA who have used the resources of Natural Church Development (NCD) to gauge and promote congregational health. Each church will tell their own story. We begin in the state of Victoria.

Wantirna Christian Community Church – Ray Rus (VIC)

We have worked with NCD for around 8 years, at times more intensively and intentionally than others. Importantly NCD has focused our attention on the issue of overall church health, rather than just the day to day, 'getting things done.' Also, NCD has a wonderful way of throwing us off guard and challenging our perceptions. Areas in which we thought we were strong have proved

the very ones on which we need most work. So it has challenged our self reliance and made us think more deeply about what really constitutes health in the church.



Ray & Wendy Rus & team

On the practical outcomes side of things we have instigated the following (and probably more) directly as a result of NCD:

- ▶ A leadership development worker (Empowering leadership)
- ▶ A program of Bible readings integrated with sermons (passionate Spirituality)
- ▶ Services dedicated to prayer (passionate spirituality)
- ▶ Service planning team (inspiring worship)
- ▶ Service website (inspiring worship)
- ▶ Small group leader training and restructure of small groups (holistic small groups)
- ▶ Regular testimonies in services (inspiring worship)
- ▶ System of consistent leadership (Empowering leadership)
- ▶ 1 by 1 by 1 evangelism (Need oriented evangelism)

The main difficulty is to how to consistently work with and integrate NCD into a church culture and structure that becomes

dominated by the practical running of the church and day to day problem solving rather than deeper questions of overall health. The NCD categories do not correspond with the way a church usually finds itself structured, since 'naturally' the church drifts towards categories such as ministries, activities, programs, pastoral issues, finances, employees and so on, as these continually present themselves as issues to be solved and worked on (especially in a growing church.) Therefore, NCD analysis easily gets overwhelmed and shoved into the background by the pressure of the urgent. Rather than make NCD an extra meeting (all groan) it is important to make NCD a vital part of every discussion?

Bray Park Community Church - John Hoogenhout (QLD)

NCD is a tool which helps Sessions take an accurate snap shot of their congregation's overall health. The snap shot is from a cross section of committed members and therefore helps leadership set ministry priorities and direction to encourage ministry effectiveness. Self critique is challenging at best, but to have a cross section of your committed members give this is less threatening. Once leadership knows what areas of ministry are strong, or less strong, the way forward is clearer.



At BPCC we have just complete our second NCD profile and our leadership is able to base decision making on more objective and measurable data. Two ministry areas have received extra funding and energy as a result of this latest information, namely **care@bpcc** (Deacon & Mercy Ministries) and Sermon Based Life Groups. In twelve months time we will use the NCD tool to see if our ministry energy is helping us fulfil the great commission and great commandment.

Gateway Community Church - Peter Smit (WA)

NCD is a great tool to review and assess ministry. But like any tool, it needs to be used well to receive the maximum benefit. Its strength lies in the Biblical principles upon which it is based. It cuts through the fog of our limited perception of church life and objectively identifies the areas of strength and those that need work. Without a doubt the NCD (biblical) paradigm has had a huge impact in the life of our church. I thank God for the continual encouragement and challenge it brings. I love the truth of the Mark 4:28. When there is a healthy balance in the soil of the ministry, "all by itself the soil produces grain."



Peter Smit

When we did our first NCD profile the results were not very exciting. The results ranged from 31 to 48 with most in the low thirties. When it comes to church health, we were not well. But over the last seven years we've just kept chipping away. Some years we didn't even do the implementation well, or

at all. But by God's grace, with the NCD paradigm in the back of our minds, we've seen wonderful growth in our health. And it really is all by God's amazing grace.

So my advice is, get started. Do a survey. Pull an implementation team together. Get an NCD coach to help you journey through. And finally keep at it.

We've had growth. We've had ups and downs. But like you, we've got more to do. And I'm praying that we steward and develop our gifts and God's church well. NCD is a tool to help all of us do, just that. (Check out the full story of Gateway CC at <http://ncd-australia.org.au/ncd-aus/davids.php>)

Redlands CRC - David Groenenboom (Qld)

Recently RCRC undertook our first NCD assessment. NCD has helped us gauge how we are tracking in critical areas of church life, and to assess accurately. We have already discussed our assessment at both Elder Council and Ministry Team levels. We have identified a number of areas where we can make some immediate responses, while other interventions will be more long term. Either way, our expectation is that NCD will be a helpful tool in moving our church toward greater health and a more effective engagement with God's mission.



David Groenenboom

Next Steps...

David Groenenboom wanted to encourage all of these leaders to take a few steps individually in response to their initial survey. He wrote to them:

"I want to stress the importance of our behavioural change in prayerfully leading toward a changed ethos at RCRC." So David suggested a few things they could start doing straight away. He suggested:

Prayer

Make the three key words we want to think about a focus of your prayer life. You know how this works: the things that focus regularly in your prayers are the things the Lord will use to influence your mind and your actions. Here's something to do.

Write the words affirmation, inspiration, and joy on a sticky note or card and put it somewhere you will see it several times every day.

- ▶ Stick it to your PC monitor
- ▶ Put it on your desk
 - ▶ Put the card inside your Bible and use it as a bookmark

Ask God to shape your vision: Lord, open my eyes to how people are serving well around here:

- ▶ I want to affirm them...
Let me see who is tired and weary – whatever the reason
- ▶ I want to encourage them and lift them up...
Let me see the really good things you are doing, Lord
- ▶ I want to celebrate them and praise you for your work...

Your own actions

- ▶ Come to RCRC meeting (Sundays and otherwise) have truly prepared yourself

- ▶ Ask God to work through you as you lead people into grace and the joy of the Gospel
- ▶ Model that joy to the people you see
- ▶ Affirm them for coming, thank them for their presence, greet them like a friend

What a privilege it is to lead people into this response, and imagine how the Lord will be blessed and glorified in this!⁷

If you or your session would like to know more about using NCD to help your church move toward health and growth, contact Jack De Vries at mtc@crca.org.au .



“The kingdom of God is like a farmer who casts seed upon the ground; and goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows - how, he himself does not know. The earth produces crops

all by itself

- first the blade, then the head and then the mature grain in the head.”

(Mark 4:26-28)

⁷As a result of the NCD survey, these three words describe the things which do not come naturally to Redlands CRC, things that needed some intentional effort for church health to improve. These things will differ from church to church.